



Virginia Interoperable Communications Executive Summary

Prepared by the State Interoperability Executive
Committee

Summary Prepared on May 26, 2005

Thanks to the Federal Assistance Provided by:



National Institute of Justice

The Research, Development, and Evaluation Agency of the U.S. Department of Justice

1 BACKGROUND

The lack of interoperable wireless communications systems has been an issue plaguing public safety organizations for decades. In many cases, these organizations do not have adequate radio spectrum (channels or frequencies) or hardware/equipment to perform their mission critical duties. They are unable to communicate or share critical voice and data information with other jurisdictions or disciplines during natural disasters, emergency response scenarios, terrorist acts, or even in day-to-day operations.

After decades of experience with this issue, it is clear to first responder organizations that public safety communications and interoperability cannot be solved by any one entity alone. It will require a partnership among the public safety organizations (local, State and Federal) and industry.

The First Responder Sub Panel, which was chaired by Senator Stolle of Governor Warner's Secure Virginia Panel, identified radio communications interoperability - the ability of first responders to communicate with each other over divergent radio systems - as a critical post-9/11 priority for Virginia's first responders. In 2003, the Secure Virginia Panel formed an Interoperability Working Group, composed of first responder participants from fire, rescue, and law enforcement agencies throughout the Commonwealth, to make recommendations to the Panel. Those recommendations included:

- Create an Interoperability presence under the Secretary of Public Safety
- Develop grant guidance for interoperability
- Develop a Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan
- Hire a full-time Interoperability Coordinator
- Develop and conduct a Virginia Interoperability Conference

In 2003 the Commonwealth of Virginia and SAFECOM, a federal program managed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to develop a Statewide Interoperable Communications Plan applying the SAFECOM local driven approach principles to an effort to plan and implement statewide communications Interoperability. The National Institute of Justice was also very instrumental in the development of the statewide plan by providing resources and equipment from an interoperability grant that originated from a Congressional Earmark from U.S. Congressman Frank Wolf (VA).

SAFECOM has a mission to serve as the umbrella program within the Federal government to help local, tribal, State and Federal public safety agencies improve public safety response through more effective and efficient interoperable wireless communications. Communications interoperability is the ability of public safety agencies to talk across disciplines and jurisdictions via radio communications systems, exchanging voice and/or data with one another on demand, in real time, when needed.

The results of this SAFECOM/Virginia project have become a best practices model for interoperability strategic planning, which SAFECOM is sharing with other communities across the nation.

2 PROGRESS

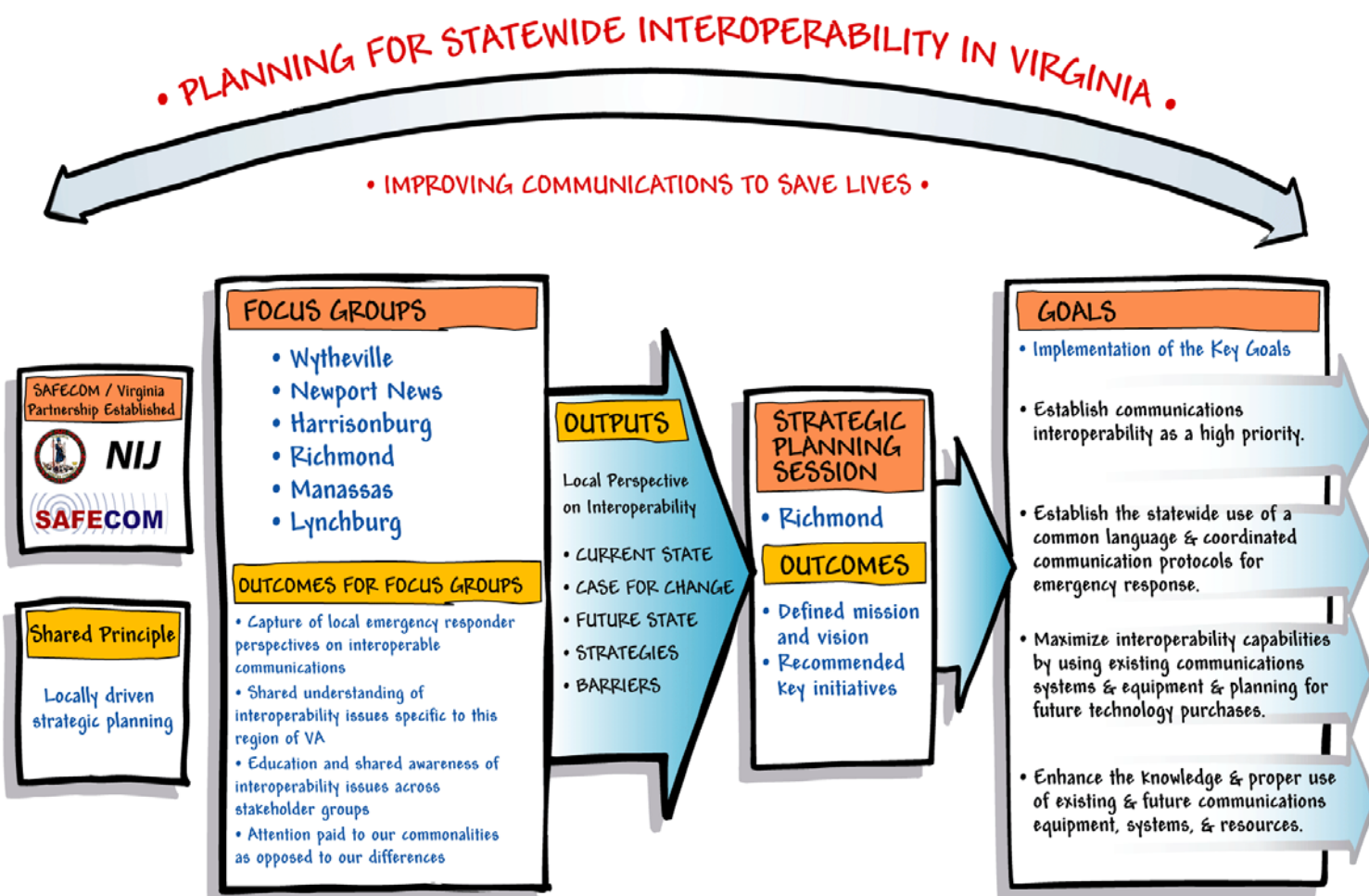
Accomplishment 1: Hired a full time Interoperability Coordinator

In December 2003 Virginia hired a full time Interoperability Coordinator, located within the office of the Secretary of Public Safety. The Interoperability Coordinator works with all state agencies, localities and regional efforts while also serving on the Commonwealth Preparedness Working Group. Virginia is one of the few states that have created such a position.

Accomplishment 2: Developed a Statewide Interoperable Communications Plan

During 2004, six regional stakeholder meetings were held throughout Virginia to gather information from the local and regional public safety responder community that would be used to create the Statewide Plan. This information was then reviewed and fine-tuned at a strategic planning session that culminated in the development of the Virginia Strategic Plan for Interoperable Communications. The process that was used to develop the plan is illustrated below in (Fig A). Governor Warner signed the Plan on October 4, 2004.

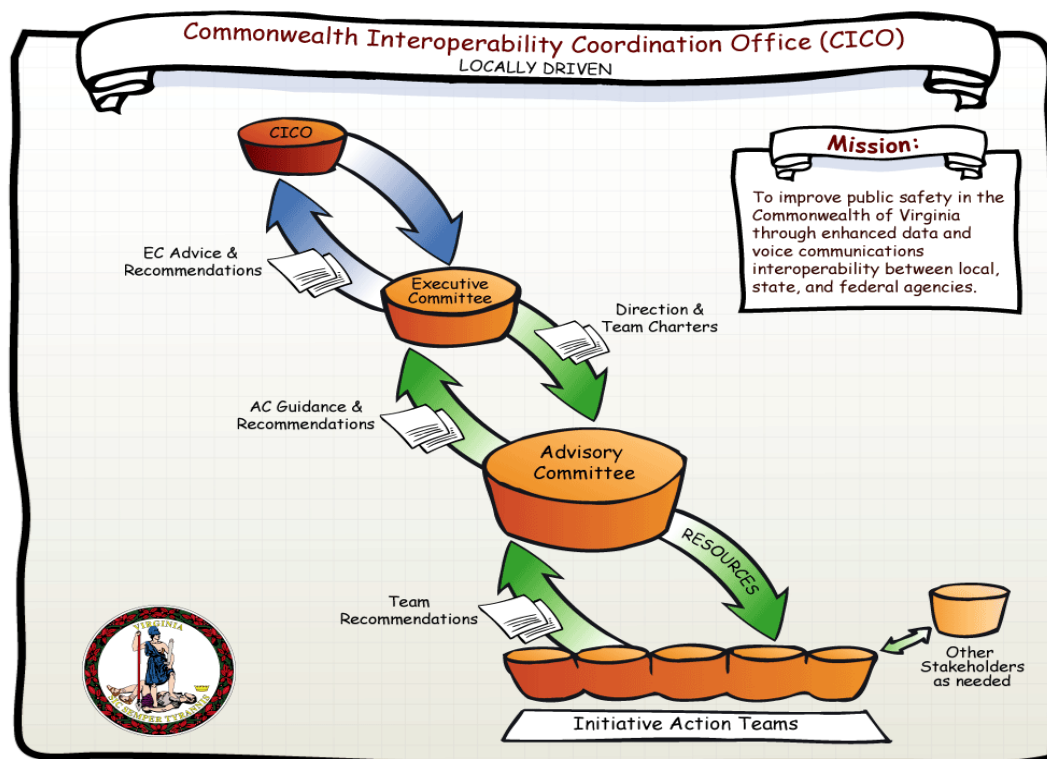
Figure A: Virginia Planning Process



Accomplishment 3: Developed a Governance Structure

The Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinators Office (CICO) will lead Virginia's interoperability efforts; however, a group of key stakeholders representing various disciplines, jurisdictions, and levels of government will play an important role in creating and sustaining partnerships essential to the governance structure. These stakeholders can share knowledge and resources across the Commonwealth and ensure that true value is provided to the public safety community and to citizens. The following is a graphic depiction of the high-level flow of information and communications between members of the governance structure (Fig B).

Figure B: Virginia Interoperability Governance Structure



The public safety community must have a way to provide input into the advising and decision-making processes for any statewide interoperable communications effort. Public safety personnel will participate in all three groups: (1) as members of the Executive Committee, (2) as members of the Advisory Committee, and (3) as participants in Initiative Project Teams. The Executive Committee is comprised of the following organizations:

- VA Fire Chiefs Association
- VA Sheriffs Association
- VA Association of Chiefs of Police
- VA Municipal League
- VA Association of Counties
- VA Association of Public Communication Officials
- VA Association of Government Emergency Medical Services Administrators
- Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator
- Office of the Secretary of Public Safety
- Office of Commonwealth Preparedness
- Statewide Agencies Radio System
- Virginia Information Technologies Agency
- Virginia Military Advisory Council

Effectively leveraging organizations already in existence allows for a network to be established at the state level that exemplifies the effectiveness of a collaborative working model across all stakeholder groups. The CICO will coordinate and report to the Commonwealth Preparedness Working Group and the Secure Commonwealth Panel to ensure both groups remain informed of progress made impacting interoperable voice and data communications.

Accomplishment 4: State Interoperability Executive Committee is designated as the Reviewing Body for recommendations on Interoperability Grant Funding

In November 2004, the SIEC was designated by a memorandum as the reviewing body for recommendations on interoperability grants funding. This allows the SIEC to review applications and proposals and make official recommendations to the Commonwealth Preparedness Working Group and Secure Commonwealth Panel for interoperable communications initiatives.

Accomplishment 5: Hosted a Statewide Interoperable Communications Conference

On October 19-20, 2004 the Commonwealth's first Interoperable Communications Conference was held with 270 attendees from localities and state agencies in attendance. This conference allowed localities to send representatives to discuss the Statewide Plan, interoperability grant funding, and development of common communication standards and review of the latest vendor products to increase interoperability between various communication systems

Accomplishment 6: Distributed \$1.7 million in Local Interoperability Grants

The SIEC was tasked by the CPWG to make recommendations on distribution of \$1.7 million in ODP funds to support local interoperable communication projects. The SIEC designed a process to solicit, evaluate and prioritize 62 separate grant proposals from localities. This process resulted in 20 localities receiving up to \$100,000 each to support local interoperability projects.

Accomplishment 7: Identified and Distributed \$460,500 in Funding for Local Interoperability Demonstration Projects

The SIEC identified six local projects to serve as local demonstration projects. These projects were funded out of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Interoperability Grant that resulted from a Congressman Frank Wolf Earmark. The six localities received \$498,012 in funding and each locality will report back to the SIEC on the various technologies being demonstrated.

Accomplishment 8: Assisted the Virginia Beach Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) in Obtaining a \$6 Million Dollar FY 2004 COPS Interoperability Grant

Worked with the Virginia Beach MSA to ensure that the grant application supported the Strategic Plan for Statewide Plan Communications Interoperability, showed a clear link to the Statewide Agencies Radio System (STARS) and included a regional approach that included all localities within the MSA. Per SAFECOM, working together greatly increased the chance of being selected.

Accomplishment 9: Developed an Interoperability Website

We have developed an interoperability website to distribute information. This website was used to conduct online registration for the 2004 Interoperability Conference, distribute information about current grant opportunities, post interoperability articles and information including the Statewide Plan. Most recently we have added a Listserv that will allow people interested in discussing interoperability to share information. The website address is <http://www.interoperability.publicsafety.virginia.gov/>.

Accomplishment 10: Passage of Senate Bill 963 that requires the Governor to ensure the annual update and implementation of the Statewide Plan for Communications Interoperability.

The Virginia General Assembly passed SB 963 that was authored by Senator Jay O'Brien (R) to ensure that Virginia continues to invest in efforts to improve interoperable voice and data communications. SB 963 ensures that the Statewide Plan will remain viable and current and that the initiatives in the Plan will be implemented.

3 NEXT STEPS

The above accomplishments are impressive and Virginia is leading the nation in the area of interoperability planning. We have come a long way in the past few years but now that the Plan is developed and governance structure is in place we are moving from the planning phase to the implementation phase. The 19 initiatives listed in the Statewide Plan will require project management and support if they will ever be implemented. Over the next year the SIEC plans to conduct the following tasks in conjunction with initiatives contained in the Statewide Plan:

- Update the Statewide Interoperable Communications Plan as required by SB 963
- Coordinate with the E-911 Wireless Board, STARS and localities to determine the feasibility of establishing a Statewide Voice Over Internet Provider (VOIP) Network that would link all EOC's, 911 Centers and public safety radio communications
- Host an interstate meetings with states that surround Virginia to discuss interoperable communications planning
- Host the Statewide Interoperability Conference on October 4-5, 2005
- Transition the Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator position from 100 percent grant funded to general fund support
- Develop the Virginia Statewide 700 MHz Plan for the Federal Communications Commission (Only 700 MHz channels for statewide interoperability)
- Seek additional federal funding to support the Virginia interoperability efforts
- Coordinate regional interoperability exercises to test interoperable communications capabilities
- Continue to work with the State Agencies Radio System (STARS) to ensure all interoperability aspects are coordinated with the State Interoperability Executive Committee
- Continue to work with the Virginia Emergency Operations Center and localities to coordinate data interoperability efforts between the state and local emergency operation centers

Virginia is one the leading edge of interoperable communications planning and is being used as a national best practices model by SAFECOM and DHS. While we have accomplished much in the past 18 months the overall challenge to interoperability is the lack of coordination between localities, state agencies and our federal partners. The State Interoperability Executive Committee and Advisory Committee must continue to work on improving this coordination to ensure Virginia remains in the forefront of interoperability planning.

For additional information regarding interoperability planning please contact:

Chris Essid
Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator
Office of the Secretary of Public Safety
Office: (804) 225-3800
Email: chris.essid@governor.virginia.gov
www.interoperability.publicsafety.virginia.gov